

Child Slave

Jacque Clinton

She was alternately known as girl or child, and never in a tone of affection. Though a name was whispered at birth, it disappeared from use long before the consolidation of memory, and though she searched her mind, she could find no trace of the sounds. Devoid of this anchor, her identity, too, slipped away, carrying the truth of her humanity in its wake. Instead, the girl lived like a shadow found lurking in corners or scrubbing the floor. She gazed at the world between parted strands of hair with her head tilted down toward the earth. But appearances often deceive. Never dismiss the thoughts that raged within her world.

Her deepest desire was to learn her name, for having a name would surely grant her power. To be called “the girl” was like being called “the chair”—both referred to an object with some usefulness, yet with no inherent rights or feelings; something that could be kept within the room, but just as easily thrown into the flames if the latter function provided greater utility.

Each day was the same. *Never falter. Never play.* The arms swept across the face of the clock as the light faded to dusk and slipped into a blackened sea. Still she remained in the room of wine-red walls and velvet tapestries. In the evening hours with the fire aglow, she cleaned the sitting room while her Masters slept, but the high prevalence of this action never managed to dissuade her fears. Dark shapes flickered upon the walls, threatening to reach out and steal the breath of a little girl forced to stay awake. With each creak in the hardwood floor, beats raced one after the next, as if waiting to tear their way through flesh, so she held one hand against her chest to keep her heart in place. Her remaining hand continued to wipe dust from the mantle, to plump pillows, and to pick up discarded trucks and action figures hidden beneath the leather chairs. She hummed to herself in a voice barely loud enough to register to human ears until the grandfather clock chimed the end of day.

She learned many lessons in the late-night hours, like always tiptoe past the Master’s bedroom. Shh. Don’t wake the large man with his scary ways and his words of “quiet now, big girls don’t cry.” They shouldn’t kick or scream

either; he showed her on many occasions what big girls should do. Shh, now. Hush baby, don't cry.

But, bright girl, she learned to be quiet, learned to be swift. She usually made it to her basement dwelling unscathed. *Dolly is waiting—worn hand-me-down from young Mistress. Beneath the covers, kiss baby good night. Only six hours before the Mistress' voice will break through and rob of dreams.* On this night, she dreamt of discovering her true name.

The wee hours of the morning rang with “girl, make the breakfast; girl, grab the backpacks—the school bus is coming; child, get out of sight.” A typical morning, it came and went.

But the girl yearned for today to be different. She approached Master with steps devoid of sound, as he read the *New York Times*. *I'm a ghost in this world.* She willed herself to be solid for this moment in time. *Look up. Can you see me?* Through the veil of hair, she stared with deep and questioning eyes. He folded the paper down to glance at her idle form—his scary face with a shadow across his chin and cheeks—and she raised a hand to keep her heart in place. “Master, sir, could you please tell me my name?” A second of silence bred only fear; she prepared to back away. Then a sinister smile spread across the face of Lucifer incarnate. “Grab me a pen and paper. Quickly, girl, don't make me wait.” She ran to the den and returned out of breath with the required items in hand. Still smiling, he traced foreign shapes on the white scrap of paper. Handing it to her, he said, “This is your name.” Her hands accepted the note, while her eyes welled with tears—she knew Master would never decipher the funny shapes. Filled with mirth, he seemed to grow before her eyes. *Fight or flight.* She fled as his booming laugh exploded against her tiny frame—she'd find the shrapnel years later.

Back in the basement, heaped blankets formed a womb for girl and dolly. She spoke to her friend while drinking salty tears. *Kali kali shy*—she spoke a language of her own. Secrets whispered, secrets shared. Her name was crumpled, but clasped in hand never to be released.

The Master failed to realize that he relinquished some of his power that day. He bequeathed it to the child along with his casual cruelty, in proving she had a name. By acknowledging this, he did not kill her spirit; rather, he stoked the embers that would breed the fire for resistance.

The Delaney's owned a house across the street. Although well into their thirties, they had no children of their own; they'd tried but a doctor had explained in most sobering terms that Tiffany's uterus would not be suitable for bearing children. Instead she taught ballet lessons to other people's kids and turned her attention to the world.

When closing the curtains for the night, she peered into the darkness and exclaimed, "There she is again, Tom. The little girl across the street can't be more than six or seven. Maybe she's even younger since she never goes to school with the other kids. It's much too late for her to be up on her own."

"I've talked to Nikhil before, and he only has a son. Maybe she's a niece."

"But still, it's awfully late. It just seems strange."

"Let Nikhil and Naima worry about that. Let's go to bed." But once in bed, neither partner fell into a peaceful sleep.

Magan was in first grade, and he hated reading on his own. The girl watched from a distance as Magan yelled and conjured fake tears when his daily reading time drew near. His parents struggled with him, grew exasperated, then turned to the internet and ordered Hooked on Phonics. Money, they thought, now that's what it takes to get ahead in this world.

Magan read in the kitchen while eating his afternoon snack of peanut butter and honey on whole-wheat bread. Sticky fingers turned the pages of colorful workbooks meant to entice young minds, while the girl cleaned the crumbs that dropped below his swinging feet. The books were okay. He preferred watching the DVDs that came in the packages his parents ordered. As he read and listened to the instructional CDs, the girl scrubbed the dishes, she made the floor tiles shine, and each day she finished only when the lessons came to an end.

One day Magan sat tracing the letters of the alphabet, and the girl dared to use her voice. "What's that?" she asked, pointing to one of the strange shapes.

"It's an A, silly. It's goes aaah."

"You're smart," she said.

"That's because I'm in first grade. And this one is a B," he said, point-

ing to the next page. “B-A-L-L. Guess what that spells.”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s ball.”

The girl stared intently at the page.

Months passed. More packages arrived. The kitchen stayed sparkling clean.

“ABCDEFGH...” She hummed the song in the night.

Ice dripped from the rooftop as winter turned to spring.

“Cl..cl...clo-ck...clock,” the girl beamed. Magan removed his hand from over the picture—he’d held it there so she couldn’t cheat. He was a slow reader compared to his friends in school, but in the kitchen he was in control. Plus, he was about to graduate from first grade.

“I can read chapter books,” Magan bragged.

“You’re smart,” the girl said for the hundredth time.

“Yeah, that’s true,” he replied.

The paper was sweaty and torn; still the black letters stood as immortal symbols against the creamy background of the page. She stared at the letters with the light of the moon that filtered in through the high basement windows and she practiced making the sounds. She tasted them and whispered them like a prayer. She dared not say them any louder out of fear that someone would steal them from her tongue. She whispered “Aahana” in dolly’s ear.

“Tom, there she is again. It’s 1 a.m. I’m telling you something is wrong...”

Something is wrong. The words played in her mind, taking control. She could not sleep. Down the stairs, one by one—like a sleepwalker, she navigated the dark halls. The 1-800 number for Child Protective Services was in Tiffany’s hand. If she didn’t pick up the phone, who else would make the call? Just pick up the phone, said the voice in her mind. She breathed deeply as she heard a voice at the other end of the line.

A car pulled up to the driveway. At first it seemed routine to those who

happened to glance out the window or walk with a dog down the street—perhaps Nikhil and Naima were having guests for dinner—but neighbors started to whisper as the volume rose. Less friendly cars soon appeared.

“Girl, get over here! Girl, where are you?” the Mistress screamed. *I’m Aahana. I’m Aahana.* She hid beneath the stairs.

The clock ticked on, revealing the passage of time. Aahana sat in a room with honey-colored walls and a box of toys. The woman asking questions was very kind. She smelled of cinnamon and spoke in a gentle voice. But Aahana did not want to speak. Instead she read the words on posters and signs as the clock ticked and time passed by.

Outside the room, Janet rubbed her temples and tried to compartmentalize her emotions. How could one fathom slavery in an American suburb? But the news provided glimpses of this painful reality. She knew the stories all too well. Janet gathered her thoughts and walked down the hall in search of something she could not discern.

Her body followed as her subconscious propelled her to Jonathan’s open door, for the desire to seek solace in humanity pulls on the heart, even when man is the source of pain. She knocked and moved inside as his eyes rose from a stack of casework, teetering on the brink of collapse. He offered no words, just a brief movement of his hand. After twenty years in the office, Jonathan knew the subtle dance of giving support and granting space.

His hand beckoned, so she took a seat. Settled in. Glanced around. So many books on the wall, she thought. Pluck one from the shelf. Sample a portion of humanity. A comedy perhaps. A passage to escape...

Her thoughts continued to flow; like a churning river, they raged over the hidden dangers in life’s path. After a minute of silence, she started the conversation as if beginning in the middle of the stream: “My name is Aahana.’ When she does speak, that’s her favorite thing to say.”

“It’s a pretty name. I looked it up. It means first rays of the sun.” He’d seen it written in black and white, solid as the girl herself. The consummate researcher, Jonathan often turned to reference books in search of meaning. He used to look up words like cruelty, but that was before gray began to run

through the black of his hair. He never found the answer. No reference satisfactorily explained the impetus behind the urge to defile fellow human beings. But names, on the other hand, are encoded with meaning. They grant identity as human life unfolds.

Janet raised her head as images filled her mind. She pictured Aahana in the other room: *Aahana sat by the window and absorbed the warmth. Aahana was bathed in light...*

Janet looked at her colleague and repeated, "First rays of the sun." The meaning captured what Aahana and so many children deserved: a new beginning to the day...

[Author's Note: This story was loosely based on a newspaper article I read a few years ago about a little girl found in a suburban home. Her parents had relinquished her to a wealthy couple to repay a debt. The story stayed in my mind, though the details were of my own creation. My intent in writing this story was not to dwell on tragedy, but to remind people of the importance of supporting human rights, and to encourage people to keep their eyes open to the world.]